

# Dealing with Conflict as Anglicans

By L. William Countryman

MANY CHURCHES are torn by difficult conflicts in our time. In this short essay, I want to take seriously the fact that we Episcopalians aren't members of those other churches. We need to deal with our conflicts specifically as *Anglicans*. What does our classic Anglican tradition tell us about how we should do this? This is a particularly important question in light of the fact that, being Americans, most Episcopalians live in a religious landscape shaped not by Anglicanism, but by a quite different Protestant tradition. We may have to stop and reflect a bit if we want to work with our conflicts in an Anglican way instead of the one dictated by our culture.

What do I mean by "classic Anglican tradition"? I mean the broad mainstream of Anglicanism as it was shaped in the Reformation. It was formed, in the 16th and 17th centuries, in contradistinction to two other types of Christianity, both of which thought they knew the mind of God quite well. One was the Roman Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation; the other the Geneva tradition, whose chief English representatives were the Puritans. Mainstream Anglicans distinguished ourselves from both — and especially from their assumption that they knew the mind of God in close detail.

## Daring to be fallible

This isn't a modern revisionist interpretation of those remote times. They saw the issues this way, too, and developed Anglican theology in response to these other perspectives. The challenge of Counter-Reformation Rome, for example, prompted John Jewel to write *An Apology of the Church of England* and the Puritan challenge caused Richard Hooker to write *Of the Laws of*

*Ecclesiastical Polity*. Hooker put the twofold theological challenge succinctly in a marginal note he wrote on a religious tract: "Two things there are which greatly trouble these later times: one that the Church of Rome cannot, another that Geneva will not erre" (vol. 1, p. 91). The one was infallible in principle; the other just behaved as if it were. Anglicans dared to think both — and themselves as well — fallible.

Classic Anglicanism did not expect the church to have a detailed and certain knowledge of the mind of God. For doctrine, it was content with relatively simple and ancient formulae. It focused less on perfect orthodoxy than on maintaining the community of faith with its life and conversation. We believe that no one will ever possess a complete and detailed account of God's will, but it is enough that the Spirit will work with us in the unity (not uniformity) of the church to guide us toward truth.

Rowan Greer has described the theological approach of the fourth-century St. Gregory of Nyssa in words that could also be used for much of Anglican theology:

Like the rest of the church fathers Gregory made no attempt to create a system of doctrine. Truth, for him, was elusive and could never be available in its fullness in this world. As a result, his ideas are designed to establish paths that lead toward truth, to describe facets of a truth that in its unity escapes our grasp (*Christian Hope and Christian Life: Raids on the Inarticulate*, p. 69).

This could be a motto for Anglican theology generally.

And this was precisely the great issue that formed us. Hooker was actually sympathetic to the theology of Calvin and the Puritans. What

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he objected to was their utter certainty of knowing the mind of God — their unwillingness to err. Classic Anglicanism, by contrast, values the ongoing life and conversation of the faithful community, however awkward and irritating it may sometimes become, far above such doctrinal assurance, attractive though it often seems. We are pretty sure the assurance is mistaken. We are also pretty sure that God’s help will not fail us if we continue to work and pray together in honest and faithful ways.

This Anglican focus on maintaining the unity of the church has created a big house, one with room for all sorts of people. Some of us have taken our theological cues from Rome (or from Medieval Western Catholicism), some from Geneva. There’s nothing wrong with including both. But it’s not the Anglo-Catholics or the Puritans or their later heirs, the Evangelicals, who have held the Anglican Church together. In fact, they’ve been the primary sources of schism and fragmentation. What’s held us together is the classic Anglican concern for maintaining the life and conversation of the faithful community.

**A counter-cultural tradition**

If we want to live out this classical Anglicanism, we need to recognize that it is a counter-cultural act in the United States. The cultural religion of America is the religion of Geneva and the Puritans. It expresses itself particularly in a certain way of reading the Bible — a way presupposing that the Bible is a well-camouflaged book of rules. No one ever seems to explain why God should have wished to make such a riddle of these rules. But the preachers are certain that they have the key to them and they are happy to impose them on the rest of us.

Many of us grew up with this presupposition about the Bible. Even Americans who have no real contact with Christianity assume that this is its original norm. Well, it’s not. And it’s certainly not the Anglican norm. What have Anglicans seen in scripture? Our classic approach to scripture is to read it not so much for detailed rules as in the context of prayer, expecting that God will encounter us in its pages. We expect not a divine blueprint for life, but a constantly renewed and renewing conversation with God and with one another.

It’s an expectation beautifully expressed by Thomas Traherne,

late 17th-century Anglican priest and poet, in his poem “The Bible.” It starts off in a kind of breathless excitement:

1.

That! That! There I was told  
That I the son of God was made,  
His image, O divine! And that fine gold,  
With all the joys that here do fade,  
Are but a toy, compared to the bliss  
Which heavenly, God-like, and eternal is.

2.

That we on earth are kings;  
And, tho we’re cloth’d with mortal skin,  
Are inward cherubins; have angels’ wings;  
Affections, thoughts, and minds within,  
Can soar through all the coasts of Heaven and earth;  
And shall be sated with celestial mirth.

This prospect of intimate relationship with God and God’s creation is, for us, the center of the scriptures; and their purpose is that we should hear God calling us into such relationship.

Anglicans have a responsibility to maintain, enhance and share this tradition through which God has so richly graced us. We cannot surrender to the dominant legalism American Christianity inherited from its Puritan forebears.

If there are those within the Episcopal Church who already know the mind of God too well to go on participating in the rich and venerable Anglican conversation, to go on maintaining the unity of the church without total agreement — well, we have to say to them, “We do not want you to go. We want to have you in the faithful community. But we are maintaining the classic Anglican tradition here. And we will not sacrifice that to satisfy you.”

Those who know too much to be Anglicans have left us before, the Puritans being the first and most obvious example. Perhaps others will leave in the future. We will grieve their departure. But our duty and our privilege is to keep on celebrating and sharing God’s rich gifts to us in this tradition we have received. ●



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